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BEAT THE FLU!

If you've ever had the flu, there's little chance you would mistake it for a common cold. Although a cold often has some flu-like symptoms -- such as a sore throat or cough -- the fever, muscle aches, headaches and chills of the flu are unmistakable.

The "Flu" or "Influenza" is a highly contagious infection of the upper respiratory tract. It usually occurs in epidemics during the colder months. Influenza infects over 30 million people in the U.S. each year - that's 10-20% of the U.S. population.

You can get the flu from breathing in the droplets from an infected person's cough or sneeze, or by direct contact, such as sharing eating or drinking utensils. The Influenza virus then goes into the nose and lungs and causes swelling of mucus membranes and drainage.

The flu virus can be transmitted in one of two ways: by touching respiratory secretions on a person's skin (when shaking hands, for example) or on environmental surfaces (like doorknobs or handrails) and then touching the eyes, nose or mouth, or by inhaling infectious particles in the air (like respiratory secretions from a cough or sneeze).

To minimize the spread of the flu, other helpful measures include avoiding close, prolonged exposure to people with cold or flu-like symptoms, and always sneezing or coughing into a facial tissue and immediately throwing it away. Cleaning environmental surfaces with a virus-killing disinfectant is also recommended.

What is the best way to break the chain of infection? Hand washing is the key, along with not touching the nose, eyes or mouth.

Signs of the flu include sudden onset with a headache, dry cough, and chills. The symptoms quickly become more severe than those of a cold. The flu sufferer often experiences a "knocked-off-your-feet" feeling, with muscle aches in the back and legs. Fever of up to 104 degrees Fahrenheit (40 degrees Celsius) is common. The fever typically begins to subside on the second or third day, and then respiratory symptoms like nasal congestion and sore throat appear. Fatigue and weakness may continue for days or even weeks.

Cold and flu-like symptoms can sometimes mimic more serious illnesses like strep throat, measles, and chickenpox. Allergies, too, can resemble colds with their runny noses, sneezing, and general miserable feeling.

If symptoms persist, become severe or localized in the throat, stomach or lungs, or if other symptoms such as vomiting and behavioral changes occur, consult your physician.

There is no proven cure for the flu but time. However, over-the-counter (OTCs) medications are available to relieve the symptoms. OTC cough and cold products can make you more comfortable while you suffer. They are intended to treat the symptoms of minor conditions, not to treat the underlying illness.

Don't bother taking antibiotics to treat your flu or cold; antibiotics do not kill viruses, and they should be used only for bacterial complications such as sinus or ear infections. Overuse of antibiotics has become a very serious problem, leading to a resistance in disease-causing bacteria that may render antibiotics ineffective for certain conditions.

The influenza virus changes every year. These changes cause seasonal flu epidemics. Because the flu virus changes over time, flu vaccine must be reformulated every year. Problems this year with the formulation of the flu vaccine has caused a national delay in the delivery of the flu vaccine. Walter Reed Army Medical Center anticipates initiation of the mass flu immunization campaign on November 20th in the Main Hospital, Heaton Pavilion, Room 2H24. The status of the Walter Reed Army Medical Center flu immunization program is posted on an information telephone recording at (202) 782-4841.

People at risk for the flu are also at risk for developing pneumococcal pneumonia. Plenty of Pneumovax vaccine is available and we encourage all military healthcare beneficiaries over the age of 65 receive their Pneumovax vaccine now. Those under the age of 65 must have a condition such as diabetes, renal failure with complications, dialysis, and other high-risk medical problems. All you need to do is bring your medical record, ID and blue stamp cards to the Allergy and Immunization clinic for review, Monday-Tuesday-Wednesday-Friday 1300-1500, and Thursday from 0800-1100.

Material for this article was obtained from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the World Health Organization (WHO), and The National Institutes of Health (NIH).